DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 056 EA 009 165

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TITLE The Case Against Competency Based Education.
PUB DATE Feb 77
NOTE 5p.
JOURNAL CIT CCBC Notebook; v6 n2 pp23-26 Feb 1977

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Assessment; *Educational Problems; *Performance Based Education; Performance Based Teacher Education; Professional Education; State Departments of Education; *State Standards

ABSTRACT

Oversimplification, overspecification, and difficulties in assessment are the criticisms most frequently leveled against competency (performance) based education. These problems are exacerbated by state governments and departments of education that have given very close attention to their mandated competency-based programs. State mandated competency-based programs bear much closer resemblance to their natural parents, the state bureaucracies, than they do to the basic demands of society. Like all bureaucracies, they depend heavily on simplistically defined, interchangeable parts and will sacrifice nearly all other values to maintain them. Although competency-based education (CBE) was intended to guarantee that certified professional educators possess a "minimum" set of skills, in practice, the minimum frequently becomes the maximum achievement expected from students. CBE programs tend to be a dead end for the individuals who pass through them. The proliferation of trivial CBE programs makes it difficult for good ones to exist. (Author)

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THE CASE AGAINST COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION,

NCPEA, AUGUST 1976

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Whenever competency based education (CBE) is attacked for its demonstrated faults and failures, its defenders nearly always respond by owning up to its difficulties but by adding: "It doesn't have to be that way." I would agree with my colleagues that it doesn't have to be that way; but I would further add: "It probably will be."

There is some dispute regarding who the real parents of CBE are. Certainly, as both its advocates and critics acknowledge, the concept of CBE is not a new one; its ideological ancestors go back many years to include a potpourri of educational thinkers and activists. But its current life is traced most often to societal reaction against substandard public school education and the demand that schools provide students with the necessary equipment (variously interpreted) to function in the "real world." The state, which has mandated competency

EA 009 165

based programs, is most generally seen as the midwife in this analogy.

While I don't disagree with the facts used to support this analogy, I would like to amend the analogy to more faithfully fit those facts. The state, I believe, fits much better into the analogy as the parent rather than the midwife. State governments have given much closer guidance and direction (and occasionally sustenance) to their mandated competency based programs than would be either expected or tolerated from midwives. Furthermore, state mandated competency based programs bear much closer resemblance to their natural parents, the state bureaucracies, than they do to the basic demands of society. Most of the limitations of CBE cited in this paper also seem to be inherent limitations of state legislatures and the bureaus and programs which they spawn.

Oversimplification and overspecification are among the most common criticisms of CBE. Nearly everyone who has been involved in developing a competency based program in education realizes by the time he has listed his 200th competency that he has just begun on the task of specifying in observable terms all the competencies which he would like the educator who emerges from his program to have. Furthermore, by this point in his efforts he has begun to develop the nagging doubt that his list of competencies, if and when completed, will add up to a suitable definition of the professional educator he would like to produce. As pointed out by Harry S. Broudy, it is extremely tenuous to assume in specification of competencies that the whole is the sum of its parts.[1] This is particularly true if all the specified parts must be observable.[2]

Closely related to the problems of oversimplification and overspecification of competencies are the difficulties which are encountered in the assessment of competencies. Of all the components of CBE, assessment has been slowest in developing. The True Believers of CBE have noted the grave danger of limiting assessment to the lowest levels of the cognitive domain where extensive specification is possible and have regularly called for the development of reliable, valid measures of performance in the higher cognitive levels and in the affective domain. But such measures still have not been comprehensively developed, and there is little evidence that they will be comprehensively developed in the near future.

Probably the brightest prospect in the CBE assessment picture is the emergence of comprehensive assessment systems which look at molar complexes of behaviors in the performance of competency related tasks. The assessment system developed by the Special Education Supervisor Training Project at the University of Texas exemplifies this approach. But it is not at all clear that such an approach will be generally accepted by State Education Departments which have mandated competency programs. The State of New York, in mandating competency based programs for the preparation of professional educators, has avowed that the particular operational modes of such programs are to be the products of individual college and university efforts and, accordingly, has persistently refused to supply universities with explicit guidelines for program development. Nevertheless, the Queens College program in School Administration and Supervision, which was patterned closely after the University of Texas model, was accepted "with reservation" by the State of New York because of its lack of specificity in assessment, while programs that have been held up as exemplars have been built upon lengthy lists of specific but trivial assessment procedures. Bureaucracies depend heavily upon simplistically defined

interchangeable parts and will sacrifice nearly all other values to maintain them. Competencies mandated by bureaucratic arms of the state government cannot deny their parentage.

CBE has gained much of its support from its promise to guarantee that all certified professional educators possess a minimum set of competencies. In other words, it attempts to establish a floor beneath which professional performance should never slip. In practice, however, the floor has become a ceiling. Few CBE programs are equipped to provide the prospective professional with training beyond this minimum level. Nor do most of them think in this direction. Once again, CBE advocates will maintain that this isn't necessarily so. And some of the better programs have indeed made it both possible and likely that their students will aspire beyond the minimum level needed for program completion or certification. But in doing so they have, without exception to my knowledge, been forced to abandon the essentials of the competency based mode. In other words, if it is possible to bring some students to a higher level of specified competency, shouldn't all students be brought to that level? Or, if a competency based program is designed to give all students what is necessary, what is the purpose of giving some students more than is necessary?

Which brings us upon another central difficulty of CBE: Who determines what are the necessary competencies for the practitioner? Or, put another way: How are the necessary competencies validated? Most generally, in answering these questions, State Education Departments and the programs they foster seek to determine both the highest expectations currently held for the practitioner and the best recognized means for achieving them. Then their CBE programs are built around those expectations. A few CBE programs have attempted to define what a proactive professional should do within a complex, changing environment; but these programs are clearly in the minority. Furthermore, such attempts are likely to be discouraged by State Education Departments who prefer professionals who have a concept of what "ought to be" that is politically safe. CBE programs tend to become tied to current expectations and practice.

Finally, CBE programs tend to be a dead end for the individual who passes through them. A preparation program that develops an individual in terms of specified competencies that are demonstrated by observable performances that are judged by the standard of current practice is probably engaged, as Broudy has pointed out,[3] in apprentice training rather than professional education. I'm sure that a good case could be made for the desirability of competent journeymen while we think we're developing good professionals, in a short while we will find that we have neither. School needs and environments change more rapidly than pipe fittings do.

At this point the CBE advocate will again say: "It doesn't have to be that way." To which I will again reply: "But it probably will be." Most of the problems I've pointed to in this paper are most likely to be true when CBE programs have been mandated by the state. I do believe that there is a genuine opportunity for universities which seek to develop CBE programs without having to do so to comply with State fiat. Competencies can provide much direction; systematic observable performances can certainly lend reliability to judgments. If no educator is ever judged in terms of his performance on competency standards, the introspective process, which must be undertaken in the attempt to build a competency based program, may still have a salutary effect by providing direction for the faculty. There is real hope here.

But even CBE programs which emerge without a mandate from the state are not immune to the dangers described above. Gresham's Law in Economics states: "Bad money drives out good money." A similar principle may apply in terms of CBE program development. The proliferation of trivial programs makes it difficult for good ones to exist.

NOTES

1. Harry S. Broudy, A Critique of Performance-Based Teacher Education (Washington, D. C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, May, 1972.)

2. Broudy, "CBTE/PBTE -- Do They Mean What They Say?" in Upheaval in Teacher Education: The Regents Master Plan, The Twenty-Second Annual Teacher Education Conference sponsored by the Office of Teacher Education of The City University of New York, March 23, 1973.

3. Broudy, A Critique of Performance-Based Teacher Education.

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